

## THE PROVINCE AND ISSUES OF PHILOSOPHY:

## PROFESSOR DEWEY'S VIEWS

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

HAVING dealt in a previous brief paper with Professor John Dewey's idea of method in philosophy, and having found his position on that initial question unassailable, we now turn to the equally fundamental question of the mission, province and particular business of philosophy.

Granted that philosophers have no private access to truth, no special revelations, and are forced to adopt the empirical methods of science, and never for a moment lose sight of their dependence upon experience, the question unavoidably arises, what does a rational, scientific philosophy *do* with its empirical method—what problems does it attack, what field of human need, interest and activity does it seek to occupy and govern?

In the volume under consideration, *Experience and Nature*, curiously enough, no distinct chapter or part of a chapter is devoted to a direct discussion of this paramount question. We have to frame Professor Dewey's answer thereto after carefully studying sundry observations and expressions in chapters in which older philosophies are characterized and in the final chapter on "existence and value."

The lack of systematic and direct treatment of the question we have posited makes the task undertaken rather difficult. But we hope to understand Professor Dewey's views and do them full justice before venturing a few words of criticism.

Let us, then, quote the more significant and clear utterances in the volume on the subject of this paper:

"Philosophy is inherently criticism, having its distinctive position among various modes of criticism in its generality: a criticism of criticism, as it were. Criticism is discriminating judgment, careful appraisal, and judgment is appropriately termed criticism where

ever the subject-matter of discrimination concerns goods or values."

Criticism is not, Professor Dewey says further on, necessarily formal, technical, academic. We are all naturally critics; we compare, analyze, test, classify and judge. We say, for example, that this book is original and that book devoid of originality; that this musical composition is melodious and pleasing, and that other composition empty, dry and tedious. We say this woman is beautiful and charming, and that other woman plain and cold in manner. We praise one sermon and rail at another. We admire one building and remain indifferent to another. All these are instances of appraisal, or of criticism. The man of science criticizes, and so does the man on the street. When Professor Dewey tells us that philosophy is inherently criticism, or a criticism of criticisms, we are, therefore, led to ask two questions. *What* does philosophy criticize, and what is meant by criticizing criticism? To criticize critics is not merely to disagree with them; it is, often, to take exception to their logical processes. If philosophy criticizes all other criticisms, then it must be omniscient. It must know everything and challenges premises; or, if it makes no claim to universal knowledge, it must simply challenge the reasoning and the methods of the other critics.

For further light we go back to the volume and to more questions:

"Philosophy is and can be nothing but this critical operation and function become aware of itself and its implications, pursued deliberately and systematically. It starts from actual situations of belief, conduct and appreciative perception which are characterized by immediate qualities of good and bad, and from the modes of critical judgment current at any given time in all the regions of value; these are its data, its subject-matter. These values, criticisms and critical methods it subjects to further criticism as comprehensive and consistent as possible. The function is to regulate the further appreciation of goods and bads; to give greater freedom and security in those acts of direct selection, appropriation, identification and rejection, elimination and destruction, which enstate and which exclude objects of belief, conduct and contemplation."

At this point a few concrete illustrations would be highly desirable. Let us take two. There is the anti-child labor amendment to the federal constitution. Many consider it necessary, just, and progressive. Others repudiate it as reactionary, dangerous, destructive and vicious. What does the empirical philosopher think and how does he reach his conclusions? Let us assume that all philosophers

agree in favoring—or in depreciating—the amendment; why should the non-philosopher bow to their judgment, unanimous though it be? And if the philosophers themselves fall out, as is generally the case, what becomes of the function of philosophy, the criticism of criticism, and of its authority?

Or take ultra-modern music. Is it legitimate or not? Has it a future, or will it join other fads and whimsical experiments? Does Igor Stravinsky write music, or something totally different from what for centuries musicians, critics and audiences have called music and have enjoyed under that name? Now, the music critics, the specialists, are divided with regard to these matters. The lay lover of music would be grateful for a criticism of the criticisms, for an authoritative judgment. Can the philosopher give him that judgment? If he can, *why* can he, and what makes him an authority? If he cannot, then the field of musical criticism is closed to him. Whence that exception, and how can we be sure that there are not other exceptions—so many, indeed, as to overthrow the alleged rule?

But let us continue sincerely and hopefully to follow Professor Dewey's exposition. To quote again:

"Philosophy has no stock of information or body of knowledge peculiarly its own; if it does not always become ridiculous when it sets up as a rival of science, it is only because a particular philosopher happens to be also, as a human being, a prophetic man of science. Its business is to accept and to utilize for a purpose the best available knowledge of its own time and place. And this purpose is criticism of beliefs, institutions, customs, policies with respect to their bearing upon the good. (Not, however, *the* good, something attained, formulated; philosophy accepts the good it finds diffused in human experience. "It has the authority of intelligence, of criticism of these common and natural goods," but no other possible claim to authority.

Again we pause to ask *what* it is that makes the philosopher the super-critic and the wise judge of institutions, customs, beliefs and policies; and why the men of science, as well as the lay public, should regard him as the ultimate court of appeal. And again we are compelled to declare that the quotations fail to furnish satisfactory answers.

A few more paragraphs from the final chapter of the volume should, nevertheless, be added. No doubt should be left in any candid mind as to Professor Dewey's definition and characterization of philosophy.

"Over-specialization and division of interests, occupations and goods create the need for a generalized medium of intercommunication, of mutual criticism through all-around translation from one separated region of experience into another. Thus philosophy as a critical organ becomes in effect a messenger, a liaison officer, making reciprocally intelligible voices speaking provincial tongues, and thereby enlarging as well as rectifying the meanings with which they are charged."

"Nothing but the best, the richest and fullest experience possible is good enough for man. The attainment of such an experience is not to be conceived as the specific problem of 'reformers,' but as the common purpose of men. The contribution which philosophy can make to this common aim is criticism."

"Only in verbal form is there anything novel in this conception of philosophy. It is a version of the old saying that philosophy is love of wisdom, of wisdom which is not knowledge and which nevertheless cannot be without knowledge. The need of an organon of criticism which uses knowledge of relations among events to appraise the casual, immediate goods that obtain among men is not a fact of philosophy, but of nature and life."

Philosophy is "criticism in the grand manner," or "a critical methods of developing methods of criticism," in fine.

Professor Dewey's claims may seem wildly extravagant, but we must not forget his all-important admission, noted in a previous paper, that, at bottom, *philosophy is a branch of ethics*. The philosopher, we are to understand, therefore, as a liaison officer, interpreter and generalizer, does *not* pretend to be qualified to settle questions of physics or metaphysics, or astronomy, or chemistry, or psychology, or biology. In all these and other regions he is bound to follow the specialists. It is only in what we call the social and moral sciences—ethics, economics, politics, history—that the philosopher, because of his breadth of view, his love and cultivation of wisdom, his sympathy with humanity, his searching yet comprehensive studies, is able to clarify, reconcile, interpret, and "render goods more coherent more secure and more significant in appreciation."

To illustrate: We cannot ask the empirical philosopher to decide whether Mars is inhabited or not; whether the theory of Relativity is sound; whether acquired characters are inherited or not; whether the latest notion of the structure of the atom is likely to prove final; whether the use of cooked food is responsible for cancer. These are scientific questions, and no "criticism in the grand manner" can

advance their solution. But it is the function and mission of the philosopher to detect and expose "deficiencies and corruptions in the scheme and distribution of values that obtain at any period." This, we presume, means that we *may* legitimately ask the philosopher to pass authoritative criticisms upon such "goods" or values as prohibition, the surtax on incomes, the protective tariff, the rules of the United States Senate, the Court of International Justice, the Geneva protocol, the League of Nations, the wage system, the injunction in labor disputes, the Dawes reparations program, the Russian soviet-communist system of government, jury duty for women, a national department of education, preparedness for the next war, the quota immigration law, the discrimination against non-Nordics, the Ku-Klux Klan, and a thousand other questions of like nature. Though the philosopher is not a *professional* reformer, he is and should be a lover of justice and reason, of the things which make for the fullest and richest experience and for abundance of living for all men.

If this be Professor Dewey's view of philosophy, it is, of course, a most revolutionary one. It *abolishes philosophy* in the sense given that term, avowedly or tacitly, by all other schools of philosophy, ancient and modern. But, before such a view can be accepted, many obscure points will have to be cleared up. Professor Dewey is candid enough to say that his conception "also waits to be tried," and that "the trial which shall approve or condemn it lies in the essential issue." But it is to be feared that the "essential issue" is too remote and uncertain. Indeed, it may never come, or be identified if it should come. Humanity is not static; it is never without moral problems; it cannot hope for the elimination of evil and maladjustment. To appeal to the eventual issue is to make scientific tests and trials impossible in this case.

Besides, what is the teaching of history in respect of the efforts of even the greatest philosophers to act as liaison officers, speak to the specialists in a sort of universal tongue, and criticize in a grand manner?

There was Plato, assuredly a great philosopher and a wise man. He could not rid himself of the belief in slavery; some of the goods or values of his time were decidedly doubtful and poorly distributed; and his philosophy, save so far as it was abstract, suffered from the same limitations. Marcus Aurelius was a philosopher, and his doctrines were noble, yet he attended the inhuman gladiatorial contests, never uttered a word against them and appears to have enjoyed them as much as the vulgar herd did.



August Comte, to come down to modern times, was a great philosopher, yet he proposed a bizarre substitute for Catholicism and tried to found a religion of Humanity! Humanity has been guilty of many things, but not of self-worship; it knows its own limitations too well for that crowning absurdity. The philosopher in this case is scarcely remembered for his performances as liaison officer and critic in the grand manner.

Herbert Spencer was a great generalizer and original thinker. Indeed, he proposed a philosophy based synthetically on all the sciences, and, like Professor Dewey, claimed the role of guide, critic and prophet for the philosopher; but, in his political, economic and social ideas Spencer was a prejudiced, most limited middle-class Englishman. He convinced himself that his opposition to free schools, free libraries, trade unions, land reforms, and like matters, followed with irresistible logic from certain "first principles," but very few thinkers of his day were impressed by his deductive reasoning in the premises. His vigorous individualism was temperamental, not logical. His conclusions were often rejected by those who accepted his premises. He caused bitter controversy, was claimed by reactionaries, repudiated by liberals, and finally became a passionate special pleader.

These examples hardly warrant the hopes or expectations of Professor Dewey in respect of the influence of philosophy on the improvement, enrichment and distribution of desirable goods!

And, pray, is there any reason to think that future philosophers will succeed where present and past philosophers have failed? After all, what *can* the philosophers do to achieve, maintain and command authority? They can study, ponder, inquire, accumulate knowledge, draw inferences and deduce propositions. We can all do the same thing, and it is impossible to determine at what stage or point in the process of gathering, classifying, digesting and interpreting facts the mere man of science, or the educated layman, enters the high rank of philosophers. We cannot certify and license philosophers; we cannot create a monopoly of philosophy. Where competition is free and unlimited, the fittest, indeed, survive, but we have been warned again and again by evolutionists not to confound fitness to survive under given conditions with superiority or excellence in a moral sense. The pseudo-philosopher, the pretender, may easily prevail over the modest, retiring, gentle, wise philosopher who scorns the tricks of the market.

Professor Dewey speaks of the pernicious and demoralizing influence on thought of caste, class, party, self-interest, vested privilege, institutionalized movement, outworn tradition. All these obstacles to progress, to an abundant life for all, to justice and beauty in human conduct, are terribly real and at times all but unconquerable. But how is the philosopher to overcome them? He has, we have seen, no special weapons, no peculiar means. Bias, dogma, egotism, pride, and vanity we shall always have with us in social concerns, and we must learn to avoid errors by painful experience, from our trials, failures and successes. There is no short philosophic cut to Utopia.

We are driven to conclude that Professor Dewey's conception of philosophy will seem to many well-nigh fatal. Mr. Bertrand Russell perceives this, and has no hesitation in admitting, or affirming rather, that philosophy, if it is to live and serve at all, must have *a distinct province of its own*, and must consist of propositions which could not occur to the other sciences, or be either proved or disproved by them. Professor Dewey refers to some of Mr. Russell's philosophic views, but, strangely enough, does not challenge or criticize his conception of the function and province of philosophy. We have a right to ask Professor Dewey to note and comment upon the objections of such thinkers as Professor Russell to his definition of philosophy, as well as to reassure inquiring and wisdom-loving laymen—to whose class the present writer belongs—concerning the future of a philosophy reduced to the position of a branch of ethical science—a science notoriously inexact—and dependent on the propositions and conclusions of the other sciences. Persistent failure to answer objections and offer explanations demanded in good faith by serious students of the evolution of philosophy on an issue so central and crucial as that under discussion here—namely, the field, business and function of philosophy—could not fail to beget misgivings, misconstruction and even ironical or flippant attacks on philosophy as such.

#### NATURE, MAN AND SOCIETY IN DOCTOR DEWEY'S SYSTEM

We have examined and criticized Professor John Dewey's views of the right or only possible method in philosophy and of the function and province of the sort of knowledge and formulated thought

called philosophy. Let us now, bearing in mind Professor Dewey's definitions and pivotal conceptions, turn to his discussion of other important questions in the volume under consideration, entitled *Experience and Nature*. Let us for the moment lay aside all objections to his startling and revolutionary—not to say destructive—idea of the essential business of philosophy. Granted, for the sake of the argument, that philosophy is "criticism of criticism," synthetic guidance in the wilderness of human life, an effort to correct, complete and improve ethical values, as well as to secure a wider and fairer distribution of desired and desirable goods; granting all this, we are led to ask what Professor Dewey thinks of man, society, nature, cosmic law, and the ethical process within that law.

It is evident that these are extremely interesting topics from any philosophical, or metaphysical, or religious, or moral point of view. It is perhaps equally evident that one may accept every proposition advanced by Doctor Dewey in respect of the subjects just mentioned while rejecting his conception of the mission and domain of philosophy.

We may begin with Professor Dewey's description of "existence," or of the nature of the existential world in which we live. We must look at the facts and events without preconceived notions, says the author, and forget theories of pessimism and optimism. What, if we look around us, do we see? To quote the answer:

"Man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence, to put it baldly, involves a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable. Its dangers are irregular, inconstant, sporadic, episodic. . . . Plague, famine, failure of crops, disease, death, defeat in battle, are always just around the corner, and so are abundance, strength, victory, festival and song. . . . The sacred and the accursed are potentialities of the same situation; and there is no category of things which has not embodied the sacred and accursed—persons, words, places, times, directions, stones, winds, animals, stars. . . .

"Man fears because he exists in a fearful and awful world. The world is precarious and perilous. Despite science and art, technique and fancy," the fundamentally hazardous character of the world is not seriously modified, much less eliminated.

"We live in a world which is an impressive and irresistible mixture of sufficiencies, tight completeness, order, recurrences which make possible prediction and control, and singularities, ambiguities, uncertain possibilities, processes going on to consequences as yet



indeterminate. They are mixed not mechanically but vitally, like the wheat and tares of the parable. . . . Qualities have defects as necessary conditions of their excellences; the instrumentalities of truth are the causes of error; change gives meaning to permanence and recurrence makes novelty possible."

Well, into this sort of world man is born. The facts and events bewilder him; he tries to understand and interpret; his early ideas are childish and shallow, and we call them superstitions. But error can be corrected only by experience, by more facts and more knowledge. "Man is naturally philosophic," says Professor Dewey, rather than coldly scientific, and he soon learns to form what we call subjective judgments—ideas of value, utility, good, evil and danger. "Man naturally prized knowledge only for the sake of its bearing upon success and failure in attaining goods and avoiding evils." Man has always needed knowledge and wisdom, instinct being insufficient in his case. And he needs knowledge today, because it is "just this predicament of the inextricable mixture of stability and certainty," of order and progress, of truth and error, of ugliness and beauty, that "gives rise to philosophy."

It is arbitrary and futile to talk of absolutes, of realities behind appearances, of fixed and eternal standards. Man must not quarrel with nature, or impute to it his own ideas. He is bound to study nature of which he is part, and to whose terms and conditions he must conform if he cares to live and enjoy comfort and leisure. To conform to nature is not, of course, to acquiesce passively and meekly in existing arrangements. Man can modify natural conditions to a certain extent, and he even thinks at times that he is superior to nature or better than nature. This for a time is a natural enough delusion, but it *is* a delusion. When man stops to ask himself candidly what his relation to nature is, what is his answer likely to be? Professor Dewey says:

"It goes without saying that man begins as a part of physical and animal nature. In as far as he reacts to physical things on a strictly physical level, he is pulled and pushed about, overwhelmed, broken to pieces, lifted on the crest of the wave of things, like anything else. His contacts, his sufferings and doings, are matters of direct interaction only. He is in a state of nature.' As an animal, even upon the brute level, he manages to subordinate some physical things to his needs, converting them into materials sustaining life and growth."

But of course, humanity long ago graduated from the "state of nature" and obedience to blind appetite. It has ideas, knowledge, art, moral systems; it reflects and exercises choice. It restrains appetite, sublimates, and subordinates some desires or goods to other desires or goods. Still, Professor Dewey admonishes us as follows:

"It is the part of wisdom to recognize how sparse and insecure are such accomplishments in comparison with experience in which physical and animal nature largely have their way. Our liberal and rich ideas, our adequate appreciations, due to productive art, are hemmed in by an unconquered domain in which we are everywhere exposed to the incidence of unknown forces and hurried fatally to unforeseen consequences. Here indeed we live servilely, menially, mechanically; and we so live as much when forces blindly lead us to ends that are liked as when we are caught in conditions and ends against which we blindly rebel."

What, then, are we to do? The answer is, We must use our intelligence and our reason more and far more effectively than we are doing even in our comparative advanced stage of civilization. "Fidelity to the nature to which we belong as parts, however weak, demands that we cherish our desires and ideas till we have converted them into intelligence, revised them in terms of the ways and means which nature makes possible." The best in us is as natural as the worst; ideals are as natural as facts; visions of beauty as perceptions of ugliness. "The striving of man for objects of imagination is a continuation of natural processes; it is something man has learned from the world in which he occurs, not something he arbitrarily injects into the world. When he adds perception and ideas to these endeavors, it is not after all he who adds; the addition is again the doing of nature and a further complication of its own domain. To act, to enjoy, and suffer, in consequence of action; to reflect, to discriminate and make differences in what had been but gross and homogeneous good and evil, according to what inquiry reveals of causes and effects; to act upon what has been learned, thereby to plunge into new and unconsidered predicaments; to test and revise what has been learned; to engage in new good and evils, is human—the course which manifests the course of nature."

Man must not magnify his importance in nature, but neither should he belittle himself and his powers. "When he perceives clearly and adequately that he is within nature, a part of its interactions, he sees that the line to be drawn is not between action and thought, or action and appreciation, but between blind, slavish, mean-

ingless action, and action that is free, significant, directed and responsible."

To repeat, we must make better use of our intelligence. To quote again:

"Because intelligence is critical method applied to goods of belief, appreciation and conduct, so as to construct freer and more secure goods, turning assent and assertion into free communication of parable meanings, turning feeling into ordered and liberal sense, turning reaction into response, it is the reasonable object of our deepest faith and loyalty, the stay and support of all reasonable hopes."

But while urging the conscientious use of intelligence, Professor Dewey warns us repeatedly against millennial expectations or romantic illusions. He is no Utopian. He calmly and simply points to the choice which lies before us. On the one hand, "authority, imitation, caprice, ignorance, passion and prejudice"; on the other, the method of intelligent criticism and comparison, of thoughtful valuation, of the use of science and the art of thinking, of the union of knowledge and ethical values in the process of production.

What is the situation today; what sort of civilization is ours? Doctor Dewey answers: Beliefs are too often determined by passion, class-interest, routine, tradition and authority; in morals, as in esthetics, there is almost hopeless confusion; culture is esoteric and religion alien and supernatural; goods are unequally distributed, and criticisms of the injustices in society is a monopoly of professional reformers. The work of scientific criticism is done poorly, if at all, and humanity lacks leadership and educational opportunity.

Two final quotations on the function of reason and the social and ethical effects of the application of intelligence to the problems of life:

"Till the art of achieving adequate and liberal perceptions of the meaning of events is incarnate in education, morals and industry, science will remain a special luxury for the few: for the mass it will consist of a remote and abstruse body of curious propositions having little to do with life, except where it lays the heavy hand of law upon spontaneity, and invokes necessity and mechanism to witness against generous and free aspiration."

When an art of thinking as appropriate to human and social affairs has grown up as that used in dealing with distant stars, it will not be necessary to argue that science is one among the arts and among the works of art. It will be enough to point to observable

situations. The separation of science from art, and the division of arts into those concerned with mere means and those concerned with ends in themselves, is a mask for lack of conjunction between power and the goods of life."

Professor Dewey demands, then, that philosophy shall do its part in effecting the conjunction now lacking, freeing thought, liberating energy, improving the means of social communication and harmonizing the interests of so-called individuals with those of the body social and politics. It is of course impossible not to second this demand, not to share this aspiration even though we may find Professor Dewey's conception of philosophy unsatisfactory and arbitrary. It should be added that every enlightened and progressive person, whether philosopher, scientist, professional man, employer, wage worker, or artist is bound, along with the school of philosophy ably represented by Professor Dewey, to work actively, in his or her own sphere, for the noble ends just indicated.

In a final paper, we shall deal with the major metaphysical, psychological and logical propositions in Professor Dewey's important work.